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How Art Star Mark Grotjahn Became Art Star Mark Grotjahn: By Repainting Signs for Local Mom-and-pop Stores in L.A.

By Jerry Saltz



Photo: Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York

Mark Grotjahn (pronounced *Groat-john*) is widely recognized for his painting prowess. Since the mid-1990s, he's made radiating butterfly-wing-like bursts of rainbow color that create schisms in vision; since the mid-2000s, he's fashioned canvases with rich thickets of raffalike lines that allude to abstract faces and raw abstraction. He also makes painted bronze mask forms cast from cardboard boxes. I'd happily own any of his work, and right now,

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at Larry Gagosian's Madison Avenue palace of fortune, there's a big new show of his paintings that finds Grotjahn further exploring the possibilities of abstraction in thick furrows and clusters of paint, gouged surfaces, and opaque color, all of which gives his work the presence of simian beings or optical shamans.

But that's not the show of his I'm most interested in. As a fan who's never spoken to Grotjahn, I've often wondered where this Los Angeles-based artist's work comes from, especially since he started making his abstract paintings when such paintings were entirely out of style. At Karma, an exhibition of far less-known work that Grotjahn made in the mid-1990s provides a transcendental answer. It pictures a young painter coming of age as an artist by *not* making paintings, per se.



Photo: Courtesy the artist and Karma, New York

The gallery is full of actual handmade store-signs and replicas of florist-display devices. Don't freak out; it's not as boring as it sounds. In 1993, Grotjahn, 25, seemingly in crisis, having just

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gotten out of the University of California, Berkeley, ached to be a painter, but nevertheless had to face the fact that painting the figure in the ways that he'd been doing it was already being done all over the world. Back then, along with varieties of neo-conceptual multiculturalism, identity-based art and installation, and nascent relational aesthetics, painting was primarily figurative — John Currin, Lisa Yuskavage, Marlene Dumas, Peter Doig, Chris Ofili, Luc Tuymans, etc. Grotjahn must have intuited that it was too late for him to catch on with this crowd. That's when Grotjahn cast aside art-world strictures and styles and instead followed an obsession — always one of the best artistic guides.

Frustrated with painting but not wanting to be left behind, he said, "I wanted to change." Art, he wrote, had become "too coded, too much talking." He longed for a kind of painting that could vie with the graphic world for attention and communicate in straightforward visual terms, not just the latest artistic idioms and clicks. The young Jasper Johns talked about this moment of breaking through to making one's own work. He said, "You do what is helpless and unavoidable." Surrender to obsession, follow something to the *n*th degree. Johns was also interested in art that could communicate on its own terms, and said that paintings should be looked at "the same way you look at a radiator."

In 1993, Grotjahn reached that "helpless" "radiator" place, then surrendered to the "unavoidable": He began, he said, painting things that "I loved." In this case, small signs that were in stores and shops all around him. There are grids of numbers that look like later-day, homemade versions of post-minimalists, like Mel Bochner and Sol LeWitt; signs in the shape of the thing they're selling, like a mug of beer, commercial versions of shaped paintings; unaltered manufactured cigarette ads that may have been of interest to Grotjahn for being round (he seems drawn to a lot of circles), or for the ad hoc way they're installed, for example, by a pushpin; or maybe it's the shiny, cricked surface. Small bars and dives, hamburger places, mom-and-pop restaurants, newsstands, smoke shops, quick-marts, and endless liquor stores are evoked. Initially, Grotjahn painted these on large sheets of white paper from photos. Soon he had a batch of these and put

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them up in his studio. And liked them. He writes that he "kind of thought they were bitchin'." In fact, Grotjahn says he "knew somehow that the originals were better." He gleaned that signs "had an audience, they knew who their audience was, and they knew what they wanted to say. Their signs were functioning." He then went into stores, studied the signs closely, took numerous pictures of them, got the colors, tools, scales, and processes down. Unlike the earlier works, which still existed in his mind as paintings and drawings, he then began making exact replicas of the real signs. Most artists would have stopped there. That's when Grotjahn crossed a personal Rubicon.

Grotjahn went *back* to the stores, and asked owners to exchange his signs for theirs. Of this strange flip-flopping of one order for another, he says, with almost Clint Eastwood directness, "It's a weird thing, the exchange." Two different languages are obviously in play; the same goes for class and color lines. Even today, some in the art world bristle, using the word "exploitative" in relation to this project. One photograph on hand shows the young Grotjahn with an Asian restaurant owner posing with his replicas next to the real signs. The deal he made with her probably didn't make sense to her, of course. In a way, it makes no sense on the art side of the tracks either. No matter; to sweeten the deal, he said he made his signs a little brighter, bumped up colors, or allowed himself to correct spelling mistakes. It worked "at least 90 percent" of the time. No one felt cheated; everyone was happy; the owners got new, "improved" signs; Grotjahn got his inspiration. Artist Richard Prince has long made handwritten drawings of jokes that people have "given" him — giving his art in exchange for the joke. Referring to Grotjahn signs on Twitter last week, Prince said the Californian is an "honorary member of the Want To Make Art Don't club." Nice movement: Art Don't.

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Painters often go through a phase of not painting in order to make their way back to it. Grotjahn's way back to painting began in a conceptual discourse on the function of painting itself, how it communicates, where, to whom, and possible processes open to it. Donald Judd memorably wrote that the chief challenge for any artist is to find “the concatenation that will grow.” Meaning, a chain of abstract ideas that can produce things the artist cannot predict, and that can sustain an artist for a lifetime and grow. That's what this exhibition shows us: a fabulous lesson for young artists looking to buck rigid artistic structures and find *their own art*.

Displayed at Karma are not the signs that Grotjahn painted, but the everyday signs he got in exchange. A lot of them have garish color or flat-footed or wonderful images and graphics. A steaming bowl of soup is painted so that it looks like cornflakes; a surrealist

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bowl of something else has the words *sea soup* rising in smoke from it. I love the we-don't-take-shit signs — the ones requiring IDs, saying checks aren't accepted, "reading not allowed," presumably from a porn store, others noting "no refunds" and "no returns." One reads like a Richard Prince joke: "In God we trust; you pay cash." There's every kind of liquor and beer you've ever heard of, odd arrays of homemade calligraphies. Different "BIG SALE" signs.

Judging from the signs Grotjahn is attracted to, I deduce someone scared, strange, on the margins, avoiding big, glitzy stores, invoking a hardscrabble, old-school Raymond Chandler vibe, an almost alcoholic loner. Sin and shame are ever-present in the liquor- and porn-sign sections. We're glimpsing an artist the way he is when he's alone; not the turned-out art product only. His desire is always near at hand here. All this informational flow and gestural mutation, these natural vernacular aesthetics, aleatory everyday things, rapidly changing obsolescence, coming and goings of signs asking us to look, giving information and orders, inviting us in, telling us where to get off. Unlike fellow Californians Jim Shaw, who simply collected thrift-store paintings and displayed them, or Mike Kelley, who used cast-off stuffed animals in his art, Grotjahn puts his obsession through an extraordinary transformation so that we don't know if the final object is art, a doppelgänger, an original, a copy, a hoax, or bad politics. Kafka wrote, "What one person takes to be a bundle of rags, or a dog, is for another a sign." This is the fabulous vacuum of the artistic perverse around Grotjahn's work.

The *Sign Exchange* project ended in 1998 — just as Grotjahn found his way to the butterfly paintings he'd become known for. The connections are many and mostly abstract, but include the materiality, textures, and burnished surfaces that mark much of Grotjahn's subsequent radiating paintings — the way these works are organized in ad hoc ways but still are never chaotic or especially expressive. More, the ways he merged painting and drawing owe much to the way that signs are drawn, colored in, painted with anything handy, and have a real organization even if they are not planned out entirely beforehand. The constant return

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to cardboard, gritty surfaces, acidic color, irregular lines, puncturing surfaces, and arbitrary color meant not for an abstract ideal of beauty but to work: All this in Grotjahn's subsequent art can be seen as part of the deep content of handmade signs and what he learned in making them. Finally, there's the strangeness of the project that must have freed up this artist to do whatever he wanted, however absurd — and many of his sculptures can look pretty silly — without having any theoretical *why*. The same duality, of the cerebral and the serendipitous, that the signs give voice to, too. All this gives Grotjahn's art extreme flexibility. In the process of making these store signs, something was illuminated: the difficulties of finding one's style, the meta-languages one wants to put into play, the distillations of different kinds of beauty, the intricate syntax of abstraction as the sign and the thing in itself, the kinship that non-objective forms have with shapes in the real world, and most of all, an aesthetics of necessity. This abject project is the bridge that allowed Grotjahn to cross over into being his own artist and make art that — in the well-known words of the late Walter Hopps — "offers the possibility of love with strangers."

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